The Vienna University Observatory

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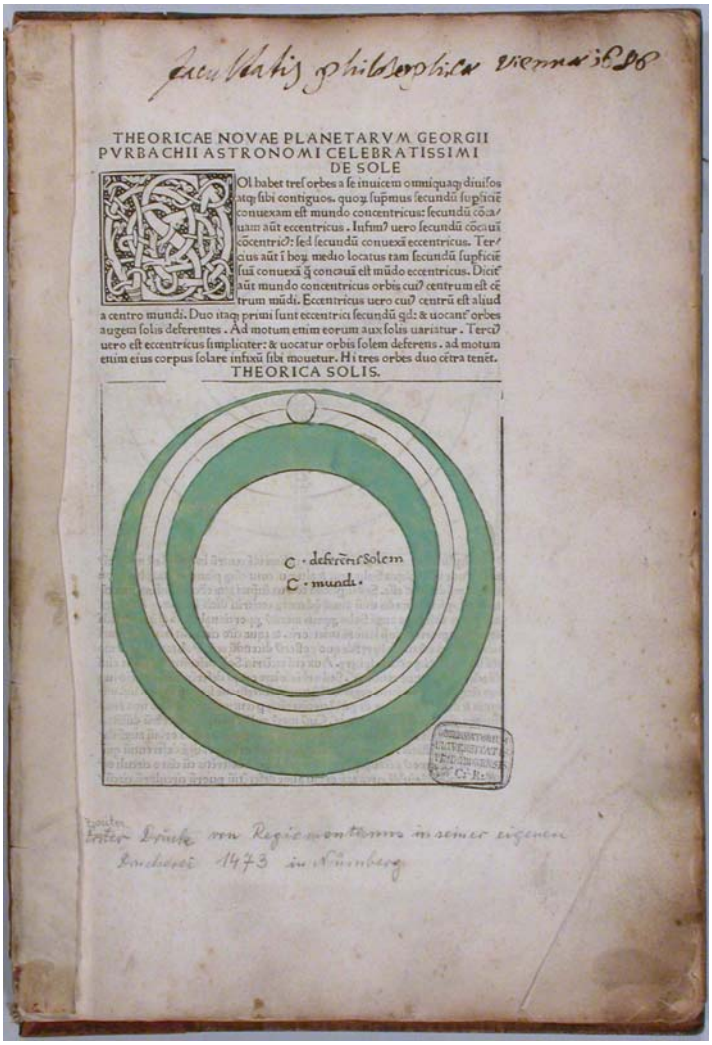
Abstract

The Vienna University Observatory, housing what was once the world's largest refracting telescope, still serves as a centre of astronomical research and teaching.

In 1819, Johann Josef von Littrow (1781-1840) became Professor of Mathematics and Astronomy at the University of Vienna. He tried to move the University Observatory - which was at that time still located at the city centre - to the outskirts, but did not succeed. After his death, his son Carl Ludwig von Littrow (1811-1877) became director of the Observatory. The total solar eclipse which took place on July 8, 1842, in his first year as director, made astronomy very popular and helped promote new investment. In 1872, a large site was acquired for a new observatory on a hill called "Türkenschanze", near the village of Währing outside Vienna.


THEORICAE NOVAE PLANETARVM GEORGII
PVRBACHII ASTRONOMI CELEBRATISSIMI
DE SOLE

THEORICA SOLIS.

Fig. 1 - Georg von Peuerbach's 'Theoricae novae planetarum', Nuremberg 1473

Building began in 1874. The architects of the imposing new building were Ferdinand Fellner and Hermann Helmer, both specialists in theatre buildings. Their concept was to combine observatory and apartments on a cross-shaped plan, which was unusually large for its day; 101 m length and 73 m width. The big refractor telescope (with an aperture of 27 inches, or 68 cm and a focal length of 10.5 m) was then the largest refracting telescope in the world. The celebratory opening took place in 1883.

The excellent instrumentation made possible numerous remarkable discoveries in the fields of binary stars, asteroids and comets. However, the Währing district quickly became attractive to the Viennese upper classes and the observatory was soon part of an illuminated urban area. Plans to establish an even larger observatory on the "Schneeberg" - a mountain at a distance of about 100 km from Vienna - failed due to the fall of the monarchy. However, in 1969, an external observatory in the Wienerwald was opened, permitting astronomical observations at a dark site and with large modern telescopes (technically speaking: reflectors with diameters of 60 cm and 152 cm, respectively).

The university observatory still serves as a centre of astronomical research and teaching. Furthermore, it conserves one of Europe's most significant astronomy libraries and collections of telescopes as well as telescope-related instruments, such as spectroscopes. The library comprises more than 10,000 books, among them many fine first editions of Kepler, Copernicus and others, the oldest title being Georg von Peuerbach's 'Theoricae novae planetarum' (1473). Together with telescopes and precious clocks from 1790 onwards, the incunables and other old books are shown (upon request) in a small museum. An inventory of this museum is currently in preparation and is expected to be available - both electronically and in printed form - by 2009, the International Year of Astronomy.

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